

Another look into ROM's Heart of Africa

by Judith Adler Hellman

Excalibur could do our university community a great service by reopening the debate over the facts and implications of the ROM exhibit, "Into the Heart of Africa," curated by Jeanne Cannizzo. Unfortunately, *Excalibur's* decision to reprint Naomi Klein's Canadian University Press article in which various critics of Cannizzo express their disappointment in what she has to say for herself two years after the event — without reprinting Cannizzo's article itself — is a disservice to us all.

If Cannizzo's article is "one sided" as charged by Ras Rico, spokesperson for the Coalition for the Truth About Africa, presumably *Excalibur* could have reprinted Cannizzo's article, with a response from her critics. This approach would have provided readers with the chance to reflect upon the issue for themselves and arrive at some position on their own. Since Cannizzo's article breaks what Naomi Klein refers to as "two years of silence," it can hardly be argued that we have *already* been exposed, or indeed over-exposed to Cannizzo's explanations and justifications for the exhibition. On the contrary, this is her first elaborated and documented public statement on the issue. Thus I would call on *Excalibur* to let us have a look at what Cannizzo and her critics have to say and not merely serve us up Naomi Klein's summary version.

Klein quotes Ras Rico as saying that Cannizzo's article "is one-sided from the maker [of the exhibition] as opposed to the viewer who would have had a totally different perspective." I agree entirely with Rico's statement. The only thing I would underline is that there was not only one actual or potential viewer of the exhibit, nor one single perspective to be brought to the viewing experience. There were many. I, myself, was a viewer of that show when, in April 1990, I toured the exhibit as part of a group comprised of faculty and stu-



dents of York's African Studies Programme.

My view and my perspective undoubtedly reflect my age, race, gender, national origin, history of political militancy and a number of other factors of which I may not even be aware. Consequently, what I carried away from the viewing experience probably differs significantly from what Ras Rico or other viewers would take away.

My overwhelming impression was, on the one hand, of the exquisite

beauty of the African objects and the music on display, and on the other hand, of outrage and shame at the racist and imperialist attitudes of the Canadian soldiers and missionaries who had collected those objects. I walked out of museum hoping that as many Canadians as possible would have a chance to see it (really, I would have liked somehow to *require* many Canadians I know to see it) in order that their complacent, smug attitudes, and their assurance that Canadians are neither imperialist nor racist, might

be challenged by what they had been forced to confront about their past in those few museum rooms.

Indeed, it occurred to me over and over as I watched the sordid spectacle of enthusiastic, if not overactive, Canadian participation in the Gulf War that many, many Canadians, including students and faculty at York, desperately need to come to terms with their history of racism and unquestioning participation in imperialist ventures. This is an aspect of national identity that Canadians don't much like to contemplate. But it is a lesson we all need to take into consideration, and it is at least *one* of the lessons that "Into the Heart of Africa" offered to its viewers.

Thus, this was the central impression that I carried away from the exhibit: a sobering lesson about an ugly, shameful side of Canadian history that most Canadians would prefer to ignore. As I have noted, Ras Rico and others brought different perspectives, and so, not surprisingly, they carried away views of the exhibit that differed from mine. To his credit, Ras Rico seems at least to have visited the exhibit. This stands in contrast to the experience of one of my students who told me last year that he had picketed the museum. When I asked him which part of the exhibit had angered or upset him he replied that he had never been inside to see it.

In closing I would like to underscore one fact that did not emerge clearly from Klein's summary of the events surrounding the "Heart of Africa" exhibit. Cannizzo's critics did not confine themselves to informational picketing outside the ROM. They also picketed her home on Major Street, and they entered her classroom at the Scarborough campus of

the University of Toronto and disrupted her classes by shouting accusations of racism at her. Under the circumstances Cannizzo was forced to resign from her temporary teaching position at the University of Toronto.

It does seem an extraordinary thing that Jeanne Cannizzo who, from all I can make out, attempted to construct an exhibit that would serve as an indictment of ethnocentricity and racism, now stands accused of racism

bearpit

criticism • condemnations • diatribes • manifestoes • rants • discoveries • speeches • ideas • dialogues • polemics • dissertations • epistles • monologues • proclamations • accusations • declamations • declarations • defences • defenestrations •

and out of a job. Whatever the limitations of "Heart of Africa" might have been, its curator is manifestly someone who has attempted to combat racism by holding up a mirror in which Canadians could see their past and present. It seems remarkable that, in the name of anti-racist struggle, she should be excoriated for this.

Judith Hellman is a professor of Political and Social Science at York.

Say it in the Bearpit !

All student submissions considered. Please keep length under 600 words.

Peace talks have little to do with peace

by Gamal Abdel-Shehid

In trying to determine if the recent Madrid peace talks symbolize any hope of establishing a lasting or genuine peace in the Middle East, it is useful to examine some relevant history.

This history concerns the biographies of the so-called major actors in Madrid — the United States government, the State of Israel and the United Nations. Having examined these, it will become apparent that the "primary actors" in Madrid are not only not interested in peace, but they are incapable of understanding the very term.

The United States government, led by George Bush and James Baker, is essentially an agent of capital and big business interests; as such it is not interested in achieving peace on any terms but those suitable to itself.

A look at the recent history of the United States government will substantiate this. The 1991 Gulf War is a chilling example of where Bush and Baker place their priorities. After having killed 500,000 Iraqis, condemning hundreds of thousands of others to

misery, hunger, and malnutrition, the U.S. government continues to propagate myths about the Iraqis' supposed nuclear capacity in a further attempt to establish a pseudo-protectorate in the region.

Initially, the U.S. government was interested in defending the State of Kuwait, but has since asked nothing of the brutal and fascist Kuwaiti government regarding its record of human rights and lack of freedom of political expression.

And the U.S. delegation at the United Nations repeatedly vetoed legislation condemning the governments of Kuwait, Israel, and Saudi Arabia with respect to human rights violations and repression.

The U.S. is particularly disinterested in condemning the state terrorism of the Israeli government. Thus, the continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, imprisonment of political prisoners, and occupation of Southern Lebanon goes unnoticed by the United States government.

In light of these facts, it must be very clear that in no way is the United States government interested in achieving a just and genuine peace.

The Israeli government is by no means interested in peace, as anyone familiar with their recent history can tell. Initially a creation of British and United States imperialism to act as a police force in the region, the State of Israel has continued to destabilize the region through military force.

Most recently, in 1982, the Israeli government invaded Southern Lebanon, massacred over 30,000 people and established a pseudo-protectorate — all in the name of self-defense. If these people are going to do this in Lebanon, can one expect that they are sincere about peace within their own "borders" with the Palestinians?

Further, the Shamir government continues to expel Palestinian families off of their lands to be resettled with Soviet Jews. Once again, the examples with respect to the State of Israel are numerous, and they repeatedly point to a total disregard for life and justice.

The United Nations, initially established to divide the world among five imperialist nations (victors in World War II — the U.S., the U.S.S.R., Britain, France and China), is now simply a servant of the United States government and its allies.

Since we are familiar with U.S. foreign policy, we cannot expect that the U.N. will act any differently than the U.S. regarding peace.

Recently, the U.N. sanctioned the genocide which took place in the Persian Gulf, it was silent as the U.S. invaded Panama, and it has been impotent in stopping violations of international law by the Israeli government in Southern Lebanon and the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

Thus there is really no point in lending the United Nations any credibility as long as they continue to act as tool for American imperialism.

It is therefore impossible to expect any just solution to emerge from discussions involving the U.N., the U.S., and the Israeli government. So anyone genuinely interested in peace cannot, regrettably, expect positive outcomes from the current "peace" talks in Madrid, despite the lies and myths that the mainstream media continue to propagate.

Gamal Abdel-Shehid is a graduate student in sociology.